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# Nuances and Complexities: A Performance Study of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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## **Abstract**

Shakespeare's play-texts have been subject to both performance and textual studies. However, due to the many possible elements of analysis in performance studies, there is still a lot left to cover in this line of research. This dissertation aims to add to the corpus of performance studies by analysing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in four seminal, recorded productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. I argue that a combination of textual and performance studies, combined with attention to actors' methods of working, can provide a deeper understanding of the personalities of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, of their motives for committing murder, and of the changes they undergo throughout the play. The essay is divided into four sections, which cover different aspects of the two spouses in performance. The dissertation shows how textual analysis can strengthen and inform performance theories, and how studying the work by actors can deepen our understanding of the characters, as well as the play.

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## Introduction

Among the fascinating things about theatrical performances is how a play-text can generate such a great variety of interpretations. As regards to Shakespeare in particular, his plays have been performed more or less continuously since they were first written in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. However still today, new interpretations of the play are presented to audiences. This tells something about “how many potentialities [...] the text[s] open[...] up” (Foakes 56).

Textual studies has for long been a common approach to studying Shakespeare’s plays, where modes of criticism like psychoanalysis or feminism can be applied. However, the textual analytical trend has, in these last decades, pivoted towards a growing interest in also studying Shakespeare’s plays in performance (Beckerman 133), and recent studies show a continuous engagement with this approach.

Performance studies is scholarly research on how “plays have been staged” (Foakes 51) and the areas of exploration are many. For example, one can analyse an actor’s “performance” (Brown 30), the “structure” (Brown 30) of a play, or how directors have re-worked a play-text in order to realise their interpretations (Brown 30; Foakes 51, 53). Brown emphasises how these various interpretative possibilities mean that Shakespearean performance studies has generated an enormous corpus (Brown 1, 30) that “can never be complete” (9). Furthermore, from the theatre’s point of view, the meaning of a performance can be understood as the “journey” (Brown 16) on which it takes its audience (Brown 15). Hence, how the characters change, and the reactions these changes awaken in the audience, become interesting to analyse for the scholar. Ultimately, the field of performance studies is about audience response and the perception of the action (Brown 11, 16), which, consequently, makes it partly a subjective methodology for scholars to work with.

In 1978, Beckerman discussed the benefits of combining textual with performance studies. He points out how scholars and directors and actors “read [Shakespeare’s] plays differently” (136). Hence, by learning about these different understandings of Shakespeare, both groups may gain “full[er] knowledge” (Brown 20) of the plays (Brown 21, 30; Beckerman 136). To date, several studies have been conducted with this dual approach, such as that by Agnes Liau Wei Lin’s et al., “Anxiety in Learning and Performing a Shakespeare Play”, and James Harriman-Smith’s “Twin Stars: Shakespeare and the Idea of the Theatre in the Eighteenth Century”.

Holmes argues that the input of actors in theatrical productions has been a “neglected area of Performance Studies” (Holmes 2). He explains how actors have written diligently about their approaches to their characters, but their work has not been properly incorporated in performance studies. He continues by claiming that studying the input of actors may lead to “new insights” in performance studies (Holmes 2), which is valuable information for performance theorists. Holmes argued this in 2004, but yet, fourteen years later, there is a lot left to explore when it comes to actors’ contributions to plays.

This dissertation adds to the corpus of performance studies by focusing on the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. There are two reasons for choosing these characters. First, they undergo changes after having committed murder, and second, their tragic story has touched both viewers and readers of the play. It is my hypothesis that a combination of textual and performance analysis – including analysis of the input by actors – can provide a deeper understanding of the personalities of the characters, of their motives for committing murder, and of the changes they undergo in performance.

The essay will focus on four seminal productions of the play. One of them is Trevor Nunn’s iconic 70’s version of the play, and the other three are more recent productions. Trevor Nunn directed his version of *Macbeth* for Royal Shakespeare Company. It was performed on stage in 1976, and later released on film in 1979 with Ian McKellen as Macbeth, and Judi Dench as Lady Macbeth. Gregory Doran’s 1999 production was released on film in 2001 with Antony Sher as Macbeth, and Harriet Walter as Lady Macbeth. As with Nunn’s version, Doran’s *Macbeth* was also a Royal Shakespeare Company production. In Rupert Goold’s *Macbeth*, which premiered at the Chichester festival in 2007, and was released on film in 2010, Patrick Stewart played Macbeth, and Kate Fleetwood played Lady Macbeth. And finally, Eve Best directed her version of the play in 2013 at Shakespeare’s Globe, and it was released on film in 2014. Macbeth was played by Joseph Millson, and Lady Macbeth by Samantha Spiro.

There are two reasons for choosing these plays. First, these productions all stay true to how they were performed in front of their live audiences before they were recorded as *theatrical* performances which, consequently, makes them eligible for *performance* studies. Second, these productions are available on DVD and hence are readily available.

The dissertation begins by looking into how a backstory, or Lady Macbeth’s mentioning of the child, reflects her persona and motive behind manipulating Macbeth into committing murder. It then analyses how Macbeth’s speech and silence can reflect his

humanism. The third chapter explores the significance of violence and sympathy in relation to the Macbeths. Finally, the dissertation considers how prose, and Lady Macbeth's subtextual levels, hint towards and reveal her disintegration.

## **The Child, Backstory, and Motive**

This section provides an account of Antony Sher's and Harriet Walter's ideas behind the backstory of the child before discussing the subject in the context of performance studies. Sher and Walter found it useful to create a backstory for their characters that they once had a child (Walter, interview). In the play, Walter's Lady Macbeth tells her husband, filled with hope, how kingship will give them "solely sovereign sway and masterdom" (I.v.76). A possible explanation for Walter uniting hope with kingship could be that her Lady Macbeth and Macbeth need the crown for personal reasons, hence, are not driven by political ambitions. In an interview, Walter explains how her Lady sees taking the crown as a way of saving their marriage since the loss of the child has affected their Macbeths deeply. Therefore, when Walter mentions "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (I.vii.59-60) she manages to convince Sher's Macbeth to commit the deed (Walter, interview). It has been argued by Walter, Brown, and Doran, that behind those lines is a painful memory neither of the spouses wants to bring up, so it is for that reason Macbeth becomes convinced (Walter, interview; Brown "At the RSC" 147; Bate and Wright 161). In performance, Sher lunges over to Walter when she mentions the child; his whole body language and expression reveals a readiness to do anything to divert Lady Macbeth's and his own thoughts from this painful memory, and as a result he becomes "settled" (I.vii.89). Thus, it can be understood how desperately they need the crown as the Macbeths would rather commit murder than deal with the memory of their tragic past. Hence, in Doran's production, the backstory provides a way of interpreting the text, explaining why Sher's and Walter's Macbeths commit regicide.

Whether actors play the *character* or the *role* may have an impact on whether a sympathetic backstory will be a realistic choice for a production. If the performers play the *character*, matters such as "psychological consistency" (Stanislavsky qtd. in Holmes 19, 42) are emphasised. This means that a character has a "through-line of action, or psychological arc, from [...] first to last appearance" (Holmes 19), which further suggests that characters' motives for action, and behaviours have logical explanations. Consequently, the backstory does not just become a manipulative tool used by Walter's Lady in order to prove her

dedication to the deed, as is one way of interpreting it (Brown, *Shakespeare Handbooks* 29). Instead, it is a major subject at the centre of their relationship, which explains the reason why they go through with the murder in performance.

However, playing the *character* and using the backstory of the child is just one of many ways of creating a deeper understanding of the Macbeths. Nunn's production, similarly to Doran's, can be understood to go for the *character's* psychological consistency. In the case of Lady Macbeth, Judi Dench portrays a character whose motive for action is something different than a tragic experience of having lost a child. Maginn writes in a textual analysis how Lady Macbeth's willingness to commit regicide is propelled by her love for her husband (Clark 37). A similar interpretation can be seen in Nunn's production where Dench's Lady speaks lovingly about how she will help Ian McKellen's Macbeth murder the king (I.v). Furthermore, when she invokes the "spirits" (I.v.43) to make her callous so that she can help Macbeth in his ambition, she suddenly becomes frightened by something, and as a result interrupts the invocation. In the same vein, Magnus and Mullin suggest that Dench's Lady succeeds in invoking the spirits, and it is for that reason she becomes terrified (Magnus 79; Mullin 357). However, Dench's Lady is set on realising her husband's ambition; therefore, she continues the invocation despite her fright. Thus, it can be argued that Dench's Lady's dedication to her husband testifies to how strong her love is for him, and how far she is willing to go for her partner. Consequently, her love can be understood as the motive behind mentioning the child when Macbeth shows the lack of strength he needs in order to commit the murder. Her intention is possibly to help her husband do what he desires; hence, Dench's Lady's reason for mentioning the child helps us understand her. On a general note, it could be argued that well-defined motives for the performance, by actors, of a character's actions, can contribute to a greater understanding of the characters, regardless of backstory.

Another approach to interpreting characters is through the *role*. According to Goold, Kate Fleetwood approached Lady Macbeth through the *role* (Dickson para. 4; Bate and Wright 152), which involves determining the reason why the character is in the play, or what function they fulfil (see Holmes 42). Goold and Fleetwood decided that their Lady's function is to "change him [Macbeth]" (Goold qtd. in Dickson para. 4), and in order for her character to be able to do so, Fleetwood's character had to become less humane (Dickson para. 4). In the play, Fleetwood's Lady succeeds in transforming her thick-skinned, and morally concerned husband into a murderous fascist; however, it could also be argued that she is simultaneously driven by the desire for power. Fleetwood's character tells Patrick Stewart's

Macbeth how she would rather murder her child than break the promise of committing regicide, and there are no traces of pain or grief as she says this (I.vii.59-64). Hence, I would suggest that it is also her dedication to gaining power that drives her to mention the child. When she orders the “spirits” (I.v.43) to “fill [her] from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty” (I.v.45-6), she says so with intense dedication. Fleetwood’s Lady Macbeth appears as if she would rather have the “spirits” (I.v.43) tear her apart than stopping the “unsex[ing]” (I.v.44). The aim, according to Goold, was to create a frightening and “psychopath[ic]” Lady (qtd. in Bate and Wright 152), which becomes a transparent characteristic in Fleetwood’s Lady, and her iron-willed desire for power. Similarly, Brooks suggests, in a textual analysis, how Lady Macbeth can be perceived as frightening in her aim to commit Macbeth to the murder since she lacks some humanistic traits (Dean 64), or psychological layers. Hence, by not adding psychological layers to Lady Macbeth, and instead emphasising a motivation to convince her husband to take the crown, the character can possibly become terrifying. The same result was achieved by the actor Simon Russell Beale, who approached his character through the *role* when he played Thersites in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (see Holmes 32). Consequently, psychological layers, it could be argued, do not become relevant to Fleetwood’s character before the murder.

Samantha Spiro’s Lady Macbeth can be understood as both playing the *character* and the *role*. Similarly to Fleetwood and Dench, Spiro’s Lady Macbeth also appears to be based upon another interpretation of the backstory of the child. However, Spiro explains how she and Millson decided that there was a child in their past, which, consequently, has impaired their relationship (Kellaway para. 1). The reason why it is not conspicuous in performance is possibly because there is a conflict between Lady Macbeth’s *role* and *character*. Similar to Muslin’s suggestion, the Macbeths appear to have a pre-murder relationship with a dominant Lady Macbeth, who is the driving force that motivates her husband to do what he dreads – to murder Duncan (362-3). Macbeth’s letter fires Spiro’s Lady up; she fiercely moves across the stage, emanating authority as she tells the audience how Macbeth shall have the crown, and she will help him take it (I.v). Thus, it appears her *role* is to “look [...] beyond the horrid act into the power which will result from it” (Cheung 437), since the audience is presented with a Lady whose main objective is to convince Millson’s Macbeth to commit murder. But she is also an affectionate wife, who, similarly to Dench, also seems to be doing it out of love. Their long and emotional embrace as they meet in the letter scene tells about an intimate couple (I.v). As previously mentioned, Brown suggests, in a textual analysis, that Lady Macbeth



uses the child as a trigger, or to show to Macbeth how determined she is (*Shakespeare Handbooks* 29). Similarly, it can be observed how Spiro puts a heavier emphasis on pushing her husband to committing the deed than on any tragic backstory.

The invention of character backstory may contribute to a sympathetic understanding of the Macbeths. However, the creation of the backstory can be disputed as well. The opinions differ whether the subject of Lady Macbeth's child contributes to the play. For instance, Bradley argues that such backstories as whether the Macbeths had a child add nothing to the performance, whereas Walter, who has played Lady Macbeth and chose to invent the backstory of the child, has disputed this argument (Holmes 19). The difference in opinion is that actors, like Walter, might find it useful in their character interpretations, whereas a critic, or a member of the audience, like Bradley, may feel it is superfluous. Even so, it is difficult to dismiss the backstory if one has witnessed the moving passage when Walter brings the subject up in Doran's production. Sher's Macbeth turns with full attention to Walter's Lady Macbeth as she mentions the child (I.vii.59-60), and his guarded expression turns into sympathetic pain. It can be seen how there is a haunting past behind Walter speaking those lines since both Sher and Walter become emotionally shaken, consequently, revealing the sympathetic traits and multifaceted characters that the text suggests. Therefore, I would suggest that a backstory might be useful when wishing to create deep and sympathetic characters on stage; however, it should serve a greater purpose than merely becoming an emotional flourish of the action.

In order for a backstory to become a realistic choice for a production, it is a subject that, preferably, should be treated on both micro and macro levels. Closest to the characters are the actors. Their input and "intuition" (Beckerman 134), such as Walter and Sher working with the idea of the child (Bate and Wright 161), are important. However, Beckerman warns that "intuition" can backfire (134), but it is for that reason time is spent in rehearsals – to test those ideas (Brown, *Studying Shakespeare* 63). None the less, actors' individual interpretations of the relevance of the child, and of backstories in general, are essential when deciding whether such backgrounds will become believable to an audience.

On a larger scale, the backstory, and/or Lady Macbeth's motive for mentioning the child, appear(s) to adhere to the main subjects in each of the four productions. For instance, the main themes in Goold's production, it might be suggested, are 'evil, and corruption'; thus, the choice of a more "psychopath[ic]" (Goold qtd. in Bate and Wright 152) Lady Macbeth might suit those themes, and since more inhumane characters can be achieved by

playing the *role* (as previously mentioned), a detailed psychological construction might not be necessary in Fleetwood's case. However, even though a correlation between the main themes of a play and the motive behind mentioning the child, as in Goold's production, can be seen, it is a presupposition too far-fetched to be treated as universally applicable to performance, in a generic sense. Instead, the hypothesis that themes and character interpretations should comply with each other can be taken as a suggestive approach for actors when they work with, and create their characters, because ultimately, actors should always be/are the decision-makers of their roles.

## **Macbeth: Speech, Silence, and Humanism**

Sher's and Joseph Millson's Macbeths both achieve poignancy when they realise how there is not going to be an end to the murders, and, as a result, suffer from this awareness. After Walter's Lady Macbeth has cleared the banquet of its guests due to Sher's frenzied reaction to the apparition of Banquo, Sher starts speaking with a wearing serenity about his realisation that "blood will have blood" (III.iv.142). Similarly, Millson's Macbeth comes to the same realisation as he sits rapt in a burdening rumination after the sight of Banquo. It could be that Sher's and Millson's Macbeths both understand that the apparition of Banquo is a reminder that they shall not be able to clear themselves of their murders; hence, both Macbeths, it can be seen, show unremitting awareness. Sher writes how he interpreted Macbeth as a character who "remains horribly sane throughout" (99-100), and a similar characteristic can be seen in Millson's Macbeth. To make this awareness more explicit, Sher and Millson both emphasise with their voices how their Macbeths are "yet but young in deed" (III.iv.165) which, in this context, could mean that they know more "blood[y]" (III.iv.42) deeds will be performed by them. Farnham claims that Macbeth becomes a sympathetic character since he "is incurably sick and [...] knows that he is" (qtd. in Dean 66). Similarly, Sher's and Millson's tormenting awareness of the consequences of the murders can become sympathetic. However, what sets them apart is the explicit clarity of mind of Sher. When Walter's Lady Macbeth suggests "sleep" (III.iv.162), Sher's Macbeth bursts out into a sarcastic laugh since he knows that he "[s]hall sleep no more" (II.ii.51). Sher's laughter is a sane reaction to the impossible, whereas Millson's Macbeth maintains a graver countenance to the awareness that he will be in perpetual punishment for having murdered Duncan and Banquo.

Whereas Sher and Millson portray two rather sympathetic Macbeths at the end of the banquet scene, Stewart's Macbeth can be seen as nothing of the sort. Even though his

Macbeth becomes thoroughly shaken and completely oblivious that he is surrounded by guests, he adopts a remarkable resilience where he re-finds mental balance rather quickly after the sight of the ghost (III.iv). For instance, Stewart symbolically takes a bowl of red soup and begins eating with great ease; hence, it appears as if the sight of Banquo's ghost did not affect his Macbeth deeply. This contrasts to McKellen's, Sher's, and Millson's Macbeths, who become so thoroughly shaken that they could probably not have done the same. Thus, this easiness, I would propose, reveals his easy attitude to murder, or that he has discovered a murderous trait in himself he contentedly embraces. In addition to this, when Stewart tells Fleetwood's Lady Macbeth how "[w]e are yet but young in deed" (III.iv.165), it appears as if his Macbeth intends to continue murdering potential threats to him as he does not speak the line with emotional heaviness, nor seems to show any remorse that his destiny is a blood stained path. Likewise, Brown points out how the play-text, at the end of the banquet scene, can be interpreted as Macbeth showing a readiness to continue murdering (*Shakespeare Handbooks* 56). Moreover, Barton explains how the character's intention behind speaking his or her lines is an important aspect that actors should convey to the audience. Thus, performing clear intentions can make the character on stage intelligible (9, 11-12). In relation to this, it can be understood how Stewart's Macbeth's intention behind speaking "[w]e are yet but young in deed" (III.iv.165) is what separates him from Sher's and Millson's Macbeths in that Stewart's murderous aim suggests that he is dangerous – not tormented.

Moreover, sometimes no words can prepare the audience for what is coming. The banquet scene in Nunn's production evokes a mixture of pity and shock as McKellen's Macbeth breaks down into something inhuman when he transforms into a beastlike, growling creature at the sight of Banquo's ghost (III.iv). Brown emphasises, in a textual analysis, how Macbeth, in the banquet scene, "[e]motionally, intellectually, and physically [...] is exerting the utmost of all that he possesses" as he is in conflict with the apparition of Banquo (*Shakespeare Handbooks* 55). However, this struggle is wildly exaggerated by McKellen, who is "put beside himself with gibbering fear and rage" (Mullin 355). This fear then becomes so unbearable that he breaks down beyond repair into an uncanny, tormented beast that crouches and spits froth as he, with wild eyes, scans the scene for Banquo. This is a shocking development; hence, McKellen, I would suggest, creates a complex character since his Macbeth can be perceived as object for both pity and sympathy; he can be understood as pitiful since a part of his humanism has perished, and sympathetic due to the magnitude of his

suffering. This split perception of McKellen's character makes him ambiguous, which illuminates a humanistic trait in his Macbeth.

However, selected instances and isolated evidence of Macbeth's emotional and mental state might not reflect the full image of his true, (moral) nature. Beckerman discusses the importance of coherence between scenes and in characters' development (138, 141). In relation to this, I would further add that analysing a character's behaviour and focusing on coherence in personality increases the chances that the audience will take in that actor's performance and believe the character to be realistic. Applying this hypothesis to McKellen's Macbeth, it can be seen already in the letter scene how morally corrupted he is (I.v). Dench's Lady Macbeth describes her husband's uprightness as followed:

What thou wouldst highly,  
That wouldst thou holily: wouldst not play false,  
And yet wouldst wrongly win. (I.v.20-2)

She portrays a hypocritical Macbeth, who, according to her, is not horrible enough in order to take the crown. However, McKellen's Macbeth appears, before the murder, to be undoubtedly corrupt already. On the one hand, it becomes clear in the text that Macbeth has moral qualms before the murder since he leaves dinner in order to soliloquise his doubts about murdering the king (I.vii). McKellen's Macbeth, on the other hand, appears to lack those genuine qualms as he speaks about his doubts detachedly, and has a disingenuous look in his eyes, which indicates that he wants the murder to happen, and this, I would argue, can only be done with the help of his wife. Cheung makes a congruous observation in a textual analysis of how Macbeth wants the crown, but does not have the strength to take it by himself (438). Hence, when McKellen later professes to Dench's Lady that they "will proceed no further" with the murder (I.vii.33), he appears to be lying in order to provoke her into strengthening him. When Dench reacts to his decision not to "proceed" (I.vii.33) by verbally attacking him with insults, McKellen's Macbeth looks pleased and becomes "settled" (I.vii.89). Thus, it can be seen how Dench's Lady might be the "source of his strength" (Magnus 80; Muslin 362), which further suggests that he uses his wife in order to get what he cannot take by himself. Consequently, a strong correlation between the image of the husband Lady Macbeth depicts as the ideally corrupted man, and the Macbeth later presented to the audience may, conceivably, be identified.

Stewart's Macbeth's subtle indications of having a humane side can be understood through his use of antitheses in speech. Antithesis, in Barton's sense of "setting [...] one

word against another” (29) makes the speech clear, and moves the dialogue, and thus, also the action forward (Barton 29, 55-6). In addition, Barton further argues how “language *is* the character” (59). Hence, studying actors’ use of speech might lead to a deeper understanding of the characters. Digging deeper into Stewart’s thick-skinned, and murderous Macbeth, he appears to be more humane than can be understood at first sight. Immediately after the murder, when the deed is starting to settle into his mind, and he comes to realise what he has done, he is genuinely shaken by the deed. “List’ning their fear,” (II.ii.34) is, at first, said by Stewart rather detachedly, but then the deed sinks in, and after a pause, it is followed fearfully with “I could not say ‘Amen’” (II.ii.34). Hence, it seems that “fear” (II.ii.34) has led him to think about his fear of what he has done, and that, in turn, leads to the morally conscious and burdening awareness that he will not find peace for the rest of his life. Interestingly, it can be seen how the two words can reflect the moral qualms of Stewart’s Macbeth.

When Sher’s, Stewart’s, and Millson’s Macbeths receive the news that Lady Macbeth is dead, they all react with deeply felt grief in various ways, which is consonant with Brown’s argument about how the play-text proposes an emotional reaction by Macbeth in the same scene (*Shakespeare Handbooks* 83). All three Macbeths respond to the message with “[s]he should have died hereafter” (V.v.17). This is a “short verse line”, meaning that it “has fewer than ten syllables” (Barton 30) and lines shorter than five feet “suggest [...] a pause” (Barton 31) – and this is what the three Macbeths do as they process the news in silence before they continue with the rest of the speech. According to Beckerman, silence can invite the audience to feel with a character (143). Therefore, the audience can and take in how Sher, Stewart, and Millson invite one to process the news, and feel the grief with their Macbeths in a moment of silence.

There are more approaches than one that an actor can take when creating an emotional reaction. When Macbeth receives the news about the death of his wife, his speech becomes a way of emotionally and verbally processing it all (Brown, *Shakespeare Handbooks* 83). Barton explains how “emotional speech [...] is to do with learning something” (138), and in order to make the learning genuinely felt, it is important that actors find a balance between the “emotional and intellectual demands of the text” (Barton 134); moreover if the actors overplay the emotions, the speech will be difficult to follow (Barton 135). Thus, in order for Macbeth to be believable in his reaction to the news, he can be emotional, but in a way so that his speech does not become blocked by his grief (Barton 135-

6). Therefore, when Sher tells how Walter's Lady Macbeth's death should have happened further into the future, "[t]omorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (V.v.19), a visible flicker in his eye suggests that he now knows that "dusty death" (V.v.23) is awaiting him. It could also be argued that "dusty death" (V.v.23) is when the news about his wife sinks in. Nonetheless, the two words generate tears in his eyes, and he continues, with a broken voice by saying "[o]ut, out, brief candle" (V.v.23). Sher speaks with objective insight, but he also shows some grief, thus creating a balance between his emotions and his thoughts. Consequently, his thoughts seem genuine. The reaction per se is perhaps not realistic, but what makes it a moving passage is how he lets the audience in on the verbal reality of his grief.

McKellen's Macbeth, on the other hand, delivers a fully detached and mechanical speech on the death of Dench's Lady Macbeth. His response to the news is a flippant "[s]he should have died hereafter" (V.v.17), which could mean that her timing was ill-chosen from his point of view (Sénéchal 94). Barton explains that in order for a character to be believable to the audience, a certain detachment is necessary when actors perform emotional passages (135-8). However, McKellen appears to take this detachment a step further. By exaggerating it, one could argue that McKellen's Macbeth instead shows an inability to grieve his wife. The scene "signals the quality of the character's tragic experience" (Marra 198), and in the case of Macbeth, I would claim that McKellen's Macbeth has become so emotionally numbed after having committed murder that most of his conscience has perished; hence, his inability to feel grief. Furthermore, it can also be suggested that his inability to grieve for Lady Macbeth is what makes the scene tragic since he once adored her. McKellen demonstrates to the audience, before he receives the news of his wife's death, how he "has supped full with horrors: / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start [him]" (V.v.9-15), and as he speaks he focuses his eyes on his steady hand, displaying how his sensibilities have been blunted by his deeds. McKellen's Macbeth can be understood as a somewhat unsympathetic character, and perhaps that is the point. Instead of feeling with him, the audience may pity the man he has become. However, the transformation of McKellen is also what makes him sympathetic; consequently, the scene also becomes highly moving.

## Violence and Sympathy

*Macbeth*, in general terms, can be said to explore "the results of violence" (Brown, *Studying Shakespeare* 149), or put differently, the Macbeths' psychological deterioration after the

murder of the king, since the focal point of the drama, one might claim, is the mental disintegration of the Macbeths. One of the reasons why the results of violence may be a prominent theme in the play is because most of the murders (violence) happen off stage. For instance, both Duncan and Lady Macbeth die off-stage in all four productions. Hence, it could be suggested that the mental transformations of the Macbeths appear to receive more prominence than the portrayal of violence. However, Goold's production diverges from this generalised hypothesis in that it clearly shows the gruesome violence of the play where nurses [the witches] murder patients and then rip their organs out; there are shots of executions; and a Lady Macbeth smeared with the blood of Duncan. But why exaggerate the violence when the text supposedly centres around the mental disintegration of the Macbeths? Brown suggests how it can become a sympathetic audience experience to watch how violence affects the characters mentally instead of showing the violence that causes the suffering (*Studying Shakespeare* 149). Consequently, by interacting with the Macbeths mental anguish caused by their deed(s), they can be perceived as more humane; thus, a deeper understanding of them can be achieved. However, it might also be argued that what Goold has created is a portrayal of what violence *looks like*, consequently making Goold's Macbeths appear as horrific characters since they are the root of that violence. I would suggest that it is not meant that the audience should see Stewart's and Fleetwood's characters from the angle of mental torment as much as they should be appalled by the evil they have created. Hence, as much as subduing violence can help disclosing something about the personalities of the Macbeths, so can a similar effect be achieved by exaggerating it.

Millson's Macbeth turns into a violent person after the murder as he starts beating Spiro's Lady Macbeth. Millson portrays a Macbeth who transforms from an affectionate husband into a man who, for instance, grabs Spiro's Lady around the neck and forcefully pushes her off stage as he ironically asks her to "go with [him]" (III.ii.61). Moreover, Spiro's Lady starts to reveal bruises in her face and on her body after the murder, which gradually increase in number as the play progresses, hinting at Millson's Macbeth's violent behaviour towards her. Symbolically, Millson's Macbeth, it could be argued, becomes the embodiment of violence. Moreover, when Macbeth invokes "seeling night" (III.iii.51) to kill Banquo, to "tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps [him] pale" (III.ii.54-5) he starts choking Spiro's Lady Macbeth. She was previously the "source of his strength" (Magnus 80; Muslin 362), but now he has become superior; hence, he starts to physically harm her. Millson's Macbeth also starts subordinating and humiliating Spiro's Lady Macbeth. An

example of this is how Spiro's Lady appears on stage covered with bruises and is not allowed to sit with the guests at the banquet until he allows her to enter. "Our hostess keeps her state, but in best time / We will require her welcome" (III.iv.6-7) is said mockingly, and reproving to Spiro's Lady, and she obeys, hiding behind a pillar. Furthermore, after the murder, Millson's Macbeth can no longer bare affectionate approaches from his wife as he reacts by twitching like a wild beast at her loving advances (III.ii). Therefore, through Millson's portrayal, the murder of the king appears to have corrupted his humane side.

Emphasis on the mental disintegration of the Macbeths, after having committed murder (Magnus 61), can be understood in Nunn's and Doran's productions. Brown writes how the impact of violence can "offer [...] an opportunity for silent thought and compassion" (*Studying Shakespeare* 165). In relation to Nunn, and Doran, violent deeds are not conspicuous in their productions; as a result, this might lead to the possibility to focus on the Macbeths' "tortured self-consciousness" (Magnus 61). For instance, the apparition of Banquo's ghost interrupting their banquet distresses McKellen's Macbeth to the point where he falls into madness (III.iv), and Dench's Lady Macbeth suffers greatly as well. The climax of the sleepwalking scene, I would suggest, is Dench's lamenting shriek, which horrifically shows how badly she suffers. A similar observation was made by Magnus who points out how Dench's Lady Macbeth's "wrenching cry at the end of her sleepwalking scene is surely that of a soul in hell. She arouses both fear and pity" (79-80). Furthermore, when Dench sobs "[h]ell is murky" (V.i.37) it can be seen how she is being tormented by the murder of Duncan. Hence, after she has shown the audience her suffering and has disappeared into the darkness, the audience is left to take in what they just have seen.

Similarly, in Doran's production, Sher and Walter are in different ways displaying how violence afflicts them. Brown writes how the text suggests a Macbeth in mental pain, and who is terrified of becoming "insan[e]" after the murder (*Shakespeare Handbooks* 49). Moreover, tying back to Brown's argument on how, in the aftermath of violent deeds, one might feel with the characters' suffering (*Studying Shakespeare* 165). In Doran's production it can similarly be seen how Sher's Macbeth invites the audience to feel with him in his torment. Sher says, with a tortured mind:

[L]et the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds  
suffer,  
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep  
In the afflictions of these terrible dreams



That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,  
 Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,  
 Than on the torture of the mind to lie  
 In restless ecstasy. (III.ii.18-24)

His Macbeth's fear of madness, and torment, become palpable as he swiftly shifts from composed speech, to agitation, to shouting hysterically on stage. This mental imbalance, I would suggest, reveals the torment of Sher's Macbeth. In contrast, Walter's Lady Macbeth is more collected; yet, similarly to Dench, she sobs "hell is murky" (V.i.37) with agony in the sleepwalking scene, which also can be argued to illuminate her mental torment (V.i). Hence, whereas Goold's production suggestively provokes a reaction to violence, Nunn's and Doran's versions of the play can be argued to offer a time to think and feel with the characters. McKellen, Dench, Sher, and Fleetwood take the audience with them in their characters' disintegration, thus creating sympathy and allowing the audience to process *with* the character what they are going through.

Best's production presents an interesting interplay between *reactions* and *thinking* in relation to violence. When it comes to violence, Brown claims that it tends to be over-directed, and the theatre should drop elaborate and creative uses of setting when performing violence. Instead, he further suggests that violence should be performed "boldly and openly" for a memorable impact (Brown, *Studying Shakespeare* 151). Brown argues for a "crude[r]" approach to performing the effects of, and nature of violence (*Studying Shakespeare* 151). There are certain similarities between a simple and bare performance of violence as maintained by Brown, and Best's depiction of violence. Best's production was performed in an open-air theatre, in daylight, on a naked stage, with the performers closer to the audience. Consequently, as Millson's Macbeth and Spiro's Lady Macbeth both stand with bloodstained hands, after having murdered Duncan, it becomes an emotionally powerful scene since there is nothing to distract the eye from the Macbeths. And when Millson's Macbeth grieves over his wife's death, the actor establishes an intimate and moving relationship with the audience. It becomes equally intense to *think* through, or process the action when it is so "bold [...] and open" (Brown, *Studying Shakespeare* 151). Therefore, such natural and simple performance of themes of violence may offer a more memorable experience.

However, I will dispute Brown's suggestion to some extent. Even though Best's production can be argued to reflect the impacts of violence in all its nakedness, an at least equally powerful impact can be achieved by extensive choreographing and by taking

advantage of the potentials of the setting. Returning to Goold's production, this performance also becomes emotionally intense with all its brutal images and scenes. Moreover, Doran's production is played to a great extent in darkness, in and between shadows, thus concealing some of the performance; yet, the impact of violence does not lose intensity in either play. Therefore, I agree with Brown (*Studying Shakespeare*) in that violence may feel powerful in a simple and natural context. However, I would then suggest that the reason why certain productions succeed in creating an unforgettable experience, in relation to violence, comes from the ability to create conformity between acting and setting. For instance, Nunn's production was set on a naked stage, which consequently "demanded naturalistic acting" (Mullin 355). According to this hypothesis, Nunn's setting would require equally naturalistic acting as the setting can generate – and it does. As a result, the intensity of Dench's and McKellen's Macbeths' transformations become so powerful that they leave the audience with horrific memories.

Depending on what shape violence takes in the four productions, sympathy appears to be either mainly with Lady Macbeth or with both spouses. Moulton emphasises how the text suggests a morally corrupted Macbeth, who enjoyed violence already from the beginning. He further suggests how the Macbeth's relationship is characterised by patriarchal hierarchy (Clark 37). A similar relationship can be seen in Goold's and Best's productions; however, the relationships are also characterised by domestic violence of two different types. Spiro's Lady Macbeth is beaten by her husband, and Fleetwood's Lady Macbeth becomes so frightened of her spouse that it borderlines to mental abuse as, for instance, Stewart's Macbeth takes pleasure in her fear of him, and demands her presence when she wishes to get away from him (III.ii). Thus, in these productions, the audience can see Fleetwood's and Spiro's Ladies as victims of their relationships.

In Doran's and Nunn's productions, the two couples can be perceived as victims of their own tormented minds. Magnus writes, in a textual analysis, how the Macbeths struggle against their disintegration, and how they live under the oppressive awareness of their actions (60-1). This image of a couple who, in vain, but nonetheless, fight to re-achieve harmony is both tragic and sympathetic. In the end, after having struggled against apparitions of Banquo (III.iv), and in vain tried to wash the blood off the hands (V.i), comes the realisation that the Macbeths cannot escape their disintegration. Even though the violent acts cannot be justified, it is their humanity, and awareness of the consequences of their actions that touches the audience, and continues echoing after the play has ended.

## Lady Macbeth: Prose, Introspect, and Subtext

In the sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth changes from speaking her regular verse into prose, which may be a significant detail. Barton explains how such changes “contain hints to an actor about character” (70). By studying alterations between prose and verse, “you [...] discover [...] more about the characters and their relationship” (Barton 82). In the case of Lady Macbeth, she has gone from being the leader in her and Macbeth’s relationship to losing her authoritative status after the murder. Consequently, Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene can be tied to her diminishing role.

But the significance of prose in the scene goes deeper. Even though the change in dynamics causes a power shift between the two spouses, what the scene is really about is an intimate insight into Lady Macbeth’s mind. Barton suggests how Othello’s change from verse to prose in the play-text of Shakespeare’s *Othello* has been interpreted and played in performance as him going through mental disintegration when he speaks prose (77). A similar disintegration can be witnessed in Dench’s, Walter’s, Fleetwood’s, and Spiro’s acting in the sleepwalking scene. They all tell their Macbeths in a seemingly unaffected manner how “[a] little water clears us of this deed” (II.iii.78), after the murder, in verse; they believe that their actions will not have any severe consequences. However, in the sleepwalking scene, prose reveals how “[h]ere’s the smell of the blood still. All the / perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (V.i.51-2). The words tell about Lady Macbeth’s broken, mental state, and in performance we see the four Ladies similarly revealing how greatly they suffer as they tremble, cry, and desperately try to wash the blood off their hands.

The somnambulism of Dench’s, Walter’s, Fleetwood’s and Spiro’s Lady Macbeths makes it possible to exclude the audience in different ways since the nature of sleepwalking is excluding of its surroundings. Hence, this makes it possible for the four Lady Macbeths to direct their speeches to themselves. Consequently, it can be understood how their sleepwalking state distances them from the audience, which, can be argued to have a strong inviting aspect to it as well. Holmes suggests how

[o]nly the imposition of a pseudo-forth-wall technique, in which it is assumed that the character is unaware of the spectator, requires the soliloquy to be inward-looking and confessional. (39)

Thus, it might look as if Dench’s Lady Macbeth isolates herself from the audience as she, with vacant eyes, pends between staring at the imaginary blood on her hands and talking with

an invisible Macbeth (V.i). However, considering how Lady Macbeth has become subdued after the murder, the audience has gained very little insight into her mental state. Great focus has been on her husband, his obsession with protecting the crown, and his mental breakdown in the scenes following the regicide. Therefore, it seems appropriate to disregard any interaction with the audience, and instead illuminate the mental torment she has suppressed, and the result feels as real as it is sympathetic.

What is revealed in the sleepwalking scene is a Lady Macbeth so fragmented she is beyond saving. Dench's Lady Macbeth enters the scene like a traumatised child, who is denied the vital comfort and solace she needs (V.i). Her sucking her finger, half choking on her sobs, and trembling walk is pitiable to watch. This is a significant change from her formerly strong self, and it shows the price of her love, and "sacrifice" for her husband, as pointed out by Maginn (qtd. in Clark 37). Whereas Dench's Lady Macbeth appears to break down in an emotionally shattering way, Walter's character becomes psychotic from her torment. An example of this is how Walter's Lady frantically tries to beat the imaginary blood off her. However, Dench's iconic cry (V.i; 2:04:48; *Macbeth*, Directed by Trevor Nunn) in the scene can serve as a representative example for what the sleepwalking scene reveals about all four Lady Macbeths – a character's complete disintegration.

I would suggest that subtext has hinted towards Lady Macbeth's final breakdown in various ways, starting after the murder. Brown suggests how "subtext is when disguise requires the speaker to say one thing, whereas the real person beneath [...] is thinking something quite different" (*Studying Shakespeare* 81). Thus, subtle emphases, or alterations in the actor's behaviour, may indicate that there is more to the character than can be seen explicitly on stage. An example of this is when, in an earlier scene, we see a strong Lady Macbeth portrayed by Dench with the exception of her, for a short moment, showing weakness (II.ii). McKellen's Macbeth is traumatised after having murdered Duncan, and he speaks, half in trance, how he "heard a voice cry '[s]leep no more, / Macbeth does murder sleep: the innocent sleep'" (II.ii.42-3). Hearing this, Dench becomes visibly shaken. Hence, covers her ears; she does not want to hear him. However, she quickly composes herself, and for the rest of the scene she tries to steer her husband out of his delirious state. Nonetheless, Dench's momentary breakdown suggests that Macbeth's words have made some sort of impact on her, and it is not until the sleepwalking scene that Lady Macbeth's state of mind is revealed where she shows how she too has been shaken by the deed.

In the sleepwalking scene, a revelation is made. Brown argues that subtext reveals what has been concealed (*Studying Shakespeare* 91, 93); the “inward truth” of the character is brought to light (Brown, *Studying Shakespeare* 91). Hence, when Dench’s Lady Macbeth talks to her imaginary Macbeth, she reveals what her guarding herself against McKellen’s “[s]leep no more” (II.ii.42) previously was about. Dench rises her hands as if trying to protect herself from Macbeth as she cautiously says “[n]o more o’that, my lord, no more o’that: you mar all / with this starting” (V.i.45-6). Her warding Macbeth off, in her somnambulism, can be related to how she in a previous scene (II.ii) does not want to hear him talk about the murder. This could suggest that Lady Macbeth is vulnerable to the realities of the murder already after the murder of Duncan.

The disintegration of Fleetwood’s Lady Macbeth becomes clearly visible in her performance due to strong, subtextual indications that she is frightened of her husband. It can be seen how a red, subtextual thread can help creating a realistic explanation for Lady Macbeth’s final disintegration in the sleepwalking scene in performance. Brown argues that if actors do not interpret their characters with coherence in mind, the performance will be “fragmentary and shallow” (*Studying Shakespeare* 79); on a similar note, yet from a broader perspective, Beckerman claims that plays should be “relational in nature” (138). This suggests how coherence in the subtextual levels of a character is necessary in order for that character to be realistic and readily perceived by an audience. From having been fiercely dominant with her husband before the murder, Fleetwood’s Lady Macbeth no longer dares to take the same tone with him. Instead, she becomes subordinated, and her fear of Macbeth becomes apparent (III.ii). An example of this is when Stewart’s Macbeth works himself up thinking about how the murder of Duncan shall continue haunting him. To this, Fleetwood’s Lady Macbeth snaps sharply to Macbeth (III.ii.29). However, she then realises that she has crossed Stewart’s Macbeth and as a result is filled with fear. Goold points out how her reaction, as she challenges Macbeth, can then be associated with how she, later, in the sleepwalking scene, fearfully and remorsefully seems to think about how Lady Macduff, a wife like herself, became one of Macbeth’s victims (Bate and Wright 162). Thus, Fleetwood’s emphasis on her fear of her dangerous husband could be taken as the cause for her disintegration, which illuminates a coherent character. Consequently, this may create a realistic, hence, deeper understanding of her Lady Macbeth’s downfall.

Walter’s Lady made a similar, yet, more subtle indication with her voice. Brown observes how Walter “cleverly adopted a nervousness to her voice, the kind of throb which

only comes when a person tries to be something they are not” (“At the RSC” 147). For instance, right after the murder, when Sher’s Macbeth is in shock and consequently forgets to leave the daggers in Duncan’s chamber, Lady Macbeth reacts by speaking with this “nervousness” “[w]hy did you bring these daggers from the place?” (II.ii.56). Walter does not show anger at Macbeth’s mistake; instead, she becomes anxious, which might indicate that she too is affected by the deed, but it is only discernible in her voice. As Brown points out, Walter’s nervousness in the scene might tell that a mental breakdown will happen later in the play (Brown, “At the RSC” 147). Hence, it could be argued that Walter’s Lady Macbeth failed to drown her humane side during her invocation (Brown, “At the RSC” 148), which, as a result, might reveal how the murder has not fully corrupted her moral conscience.

The character who gives least hints about a future mental breakdown is Spiro’s Lady Macbeth, who, consequently, can be seen as the most affective portrayal since her revelation may come as a shock to the audience. Apart from Spiro’s short and moving soliloquy (III.ii), very few clues have been given about a concealed depression. Thus, it might be for that reason her sleepwalking scene becomes a powerful revelation of her interior since depression does not have a face. After the murder of the king, Spiro’s Lady accepts her new position as a subordinated and abused wife, and she does so without any objections or showing Macbeth, or the audience her misery. Hence, Lady Macbeth, one might argue, appears realistic and moving since she portrays an individual who conceals her true, inner feelings from Macbeth and the audience. It is only in the sleepwalking scene that she shows how badly she suffers the consequences of the turn of events after the murder as she, covered in bruises, appears on stage completely broken, and frantically tries to wash the blood off her hands (V.i).

## Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that a combination of textual and performance analysis provides a deeper understanding of the personalities of the Macbeths, of their motives for committing murder, and of the changes they undergo in performance. Dench’s and Walter’s Ladies can be understood to have the well-being of their spouses, or their relationship with their husbands, as the motive behind mentioning the child. In contrast, Fleetwood’s and Spiro’s Lady Macbeths appear to use the child as a manipulative tool in order to gain power. Furthermore, I have shown how speech can reflect the complexity of Macbeth’s humanism. It has also been shown how violence can affect the Macbeths in various ways; for example, the couples of Nunn’s and Doran’s productions can be understood as being oppressed by the

murder(s), and in Goold's and Best's productions, Lady Macbeth can be seen as a victim of domestic violence. However, in spite of the differences listed above, all four productions reveal Lady Macbeth's mental torment in the sleepwalking scene.

The dissertation has also argued that studying performances in combination with the actors' methods of working may help deepen the understanding of the characters in performance. It can be understood how playing the *character* can add sympathetic layers to Lady Macbeth, whereas playing the *role* can make her appear inhumane, and fiercely driven by power when she mentions the child. Moreover, the play-text offers the possibility for actors to interpret Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's mentioning of the child as a motivation for why they commit regicide. Furthermore, I have also showed how speech and silence can reflect Macbeth's humanism. For instance, antithesis could reveal humane traits in an otherwise seemingly unsympathetic character like Stewart's Macbeth. I have also claimed that different ways of portraying violence in *Macbeth* can suggest different images of the couple; for example, by not exaggerating violence, like in Doran's production, the Macbeths can then show the audience how terribly they suffer in the aftermath of the murder of the king. Finally, I have also suggested how subtext can reveal the cause for Lady Macbeth's final disintegration, and how terribly she has suffered since after the murder.

In conclusion, the audience witnesses nuanced and complex characters, all with different motives for committing the deed, all affected by the consequences of it in personal ways. This dissertation has shown not only how textual analysis can strengthen and inform performance and performance theory, but also how the interpretation of an individual actor can deepen and enrich our view of the play and its characters, ultimately giving back to textual analysis as much as it gets from it.

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